

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL AL DOCHNAL, DIRECTOR OF CURRENT OPERATIONS, COALITION MILITARY ASSISTANCE TRANSITION TEAM, MNSTC-I (VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM BAGHDAD, IRAQ) TIME: 9:00 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, AUGUST 17, 2007

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Well, we got four folks on line right now, I suppose we could just go ahead and get started.

We had a bit of a change-up this morning. Brigadier General Swann was called away. However, Colonel Al Dochnal is the deputy -- or actually the director of Current Operations with the Coalition Military Assistant Transition Team, and he's with us today kind of filling in.

And sir, do you have an opening statement for us?

COL. DOCHNAL: Yeah. As you know, I'm speaking to you here from Baghdad, Iraq. And, you know, CMATT, the CMATT mission supports the Iraqi Ministry of Defense and the Joint Headquarters as they man, train and equip, base and sustain the army units throughout Iraq until they achieve operational readiness in order to support the Multinational Security Transition Command-Iraq and also the MNFI, Multinational Force-Iraq missions. And that's all to build a unified, stable, democratic Iraq.

One of the things I thought I'd talk to y'all about today here is, though, even though the Iraqi army and our Army is in contact with the enemy here, is that they continue to train and equip while engaged in the fight. And although training -- or fighting continues, so does training at the same time.

And some of those things I'll talk to you about today is that we have 11 basic combat training centers geographically dispersed throughout Iraq, and then this year -- by the end of this year we should have -- we will have trained, with our counterparts, up to 107,520 Iraqi soldiers. And in fact, here in the real near future, what we call Cycle Six, which will end at the end of this month, first part of September, we're going to generate another 14,439 Iraqi soldiers to put into the fight. And the Iraqi army continues to fight alongside us and they're making a difference in the security of their country.

And I kind of -- I'll drop it off there, and if there's any -- if you want to go ahead and start and ask any questions of me with regard to training, manning and equipping, basing, I'd be glad to talk about that.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And thank you very much for joining us here at this Bloggers Roundtable this morning.

Grim, you were on the line first, so why don't you get us started off.

Q I'd like to ask about the comments we've seen in the press from General Petraeus that he is expecting a smaller footprint by, say, next summer. Do you think that the training that you're doing supports that idea, or is it just a reality of where we are in terms of our own force deployment?

COL. DOCHNAL: I think General Petraeus's comments are in regard to the American combat forces here. The mission from our perspective with regard to training, manning and equipping and basing, we're continuing to still expand and train even more within the training base of the Iraqi army.

So I think that mission's going to continue to expand and accelerate here at a pretty fast pace, based on some of the numbers I just told you earlier, until, you know, such time that we achieve overmatch with the enemy. I'm not sure what that date is on the ground. That's an operational decision and analysis that's required. But one thing is for sure -- I can tell you -- is that we're going to continue to train and continue to improve on the quality of training here in Iraq, so that some day, that eventuality that you just talked about can take place.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And DJ Elliott.

Q General, I've been tracking the new brigades that are being formed and the new divisions, the 11th, 12th, 13th, and some of the new support elements and so on, what little I can pick out. And I keep noticing gaps in what I see in the TOE, like, are you planned to stand up the support brigades, artillery brigades? Is ISAF expanding to a division? What is the status of the IA expansion? And what are you going towards?

COL. DOCHNAL: Well, let me just tell you some of the unique differences with the Iraqi army. First of all, there is a traditional same type of logistics structure, but the naming convention is a little bit different. Whereas in Iraq, we have regional support units, within those -- underneath those regional support units that are located in five geographical areas and support the divisions in those five geographical areas throughout Iraq. You have GSUs, which are down to the brigade level, okay? Within that, the divisions themselves have what's known as a motor transport regiment, and again has the same various companies that we would have in a traditional, you know, support battalion within the U.S. Army.

So the naming convention's a little bit different. We do continue to generate those forces and we continue to accelerate and expand those. And in fact in this next cycle, we're going to continue to -- we're going to train. I'm not sure of the number right now, but we're going to fill out the rest of the regional support units and some of the garrison support units here in the near future.

So there is a lot of work in that regard being done. The Taji National Depot is being expanded and stood up at the same time. But it's hard work, you know, putting in a logistical infrastructure that has got to be able to respond quickly throughout Iraq. MR. HOLT: All right, Jarred.

Q Yes, sir, good afternoon, sir. Thank you for your time.

Kind of a two part question: First is, we see the reports of the former insurgents, 1920s Revolutionary Brigades and parts of JAM or parts of the different Sunni ISIs, who've come back kind of into the fold and decide to cast their lot with us.

And so in the mainstream media back here in the States, they've been reporting, well, yeah, we see these guys and they're dressed -- you know, they're wearing tennis shoes and jeans and they're kind of in no-man's land. How are the efforts coming as far as bringing in the Anbar province, the former Sunni insurgents into the security forces? And also, as a continuation of that same thought, how has been the interaction between the Sunni and the Shi'a within the units, which used to be problematic?

COL. DOCHNAL: Let me comment on your first part. You know, I'd like to -- within the first part, you know, you've got -- we've had, you know, those who've stood outside the political process in the past but now have reconciled and have become part of the process. And that's what you're really seeing, is you're seeing those who stood on the fence before and didn't join the political process now coming back. And again, I kind of term them as the reconcilable portion and group within Iraq. And they want to be part of the political process. They want to be part of the building of the nation of Iraq. But then on the other side you've got the irreconcilables, which is those insurgents that we continue to have to engage throughout. So that is a good thing.

And what we're seeing specifically out in the Al Anbar province is that you've now seen the entire -- 99 -- or a good percentage, I should say, a majority, of the Al Anbar province become a part of the political process and want to be a part of the nation-building here in Iraq. And what we see is, yeah, you might have seen some of those photos of them in tennis shoes or whatever, but I can tell you that what we see now is that they're now part of the recruiting process and they're now being recruited and put into the army, and in places like Habbaniyah, where in each cycle -- the cycle's five weeks long for basic combat training -- we're training up to 3,000. And in this cycle we've got over 3,000 that have joined the army in the Al Anbar province. So I think we're moving forward.

With regard to the Sunni-Shi'a friction, I'll just tell you personally from my travels throughout our 11 different training centers geographically dispersed throughout Iraq, I just don't see that friction that I read about all the time in the same context. There's always natural friction, you know, with people coming together trying to, you know, come into actually, you know, an environment or a culture, and we'll call it the army culture.

There's a little friction there, but not the friction that -- it seems the army has kind of divested itself of that friction between Sunnis and Shi'as, although, yes, yeah, we have some of that, but I see very little of it. And I can tell you, the army is growing day by day, getting better with each day, each event, each generation, and I see them being kind of the catalyst for bonding everybody here, the glue that's going to hold everything together here in the future. Over.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Andrew Lubin.

Q Colonel, good afternoon. This is Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. In my time over in your area, I met some really good generals and really good colonels. I met a lot of enthusiastic, young Iraqi enlisted men. The weakness seems to be the staff NCOs. Is there any emphasis on staff NCO training, or is this just going to take a couple of years for them to develop?

COL. DOCHNAL: Well, there is a couple things there.

One is it is the development. You've got to remember, in a previous model that the Iraqi army was in was the old former Soviet Union. NCOs didn't play a big part in that model, so there's not a ready group of noncommissioned officers out there to -- by which to regreen and bring back into the process.

So what do you have to do? You have to train them, but you got to grow them within your ranks. So within your ranks, you bring them into basic combat training, you try to identify those that exemplify those attributes that we seek at the noncommissioned officer level, we try to put them through what we call a corporal's course, and then, again, try to build the noncommissioned officer corps within Iraq here. But we're working very hard at it, the Iraqis are working very hard at it, and it's paying big dividends here with the army as they -- at every one of those 11 locations that I talked about; that's exactly what I described what we're doing with our Iraqi counterparts, trying to train more noncommissioned officers and get more into the force.

But it's not something where we're able to turn it on. As you well know, it takes a while to grow a noncommissioned officer within your force.

So we're -- again, I wouldn't put a time period on it, but again, it's getting -- the key message I want everybody to take away with -- is there's progress being made every day with regard to basic combat training, soldiers, noncommissioned officers and what we call military operational specialty qualifications skills training within the force -- so again, progress across the board. Over.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you.

Colonel Al Dochnal is with us this morning on the Bloggers Roundtable, is the director of current operations for the Coalition Military Assistance Transition Team -- or Training Team. Excuse me.

Any follow-up questions, guys?

Q Yes, I have one. On the SIBs, I know they're being pulled in for retraining. Is there any sort of timetable on how long it's going to take for that?

COL. DOCHNAL: As we pull them in -- again, it's just not a matter of pulling them in. You got to -- as you pull them off the line for their particular sector -- that they guarded the pipeline -- again, the operational commander's got to weigh pulling them in and bringing another force in to guard that particular portion of pipeline.

So they are being pulled in. There is a training plan to bring -- to retrain all -- and bring all 17 back into the -- under the Iraqi army. And that's different. You know, in the past, the SIBs were trained and equipped and were under the Ministry of Oil before. Now there's -- the decision is, they're being brought back underneath the Iraqi army, and they'll receive their five

weeks of training. We'll again identify and regreen the noncommissioned officers within that formation, also the MOSQ piece of it.

But the key is, they're up underneath the Iraqi army control, and whatever -- wherever those battalions were located at before, they will come up underneath the control of that respective division, so that essentially the division commanders will start inheriting within their formations these new -- and again, we're not calling them SIBs anymore -- strategic infrastructure battalions. We're now calling them the infrastructure -- Iraqi army infrastructure battalions.

And we've got a plan, and again, it's a very -- it's a deliberate sequence plan and which, again, has got to be weighed with the operational aspects of the mission, again with the MND-North and some of the other commanders before we just pull them off line.

So I think there's a good balance there with pulling them off. And again, it's like anything; you know, we can train a lot of folks quickly, but it might leave a gap, and that's what we don't want to do.

But I could tell you this. Every five weeks we're at least training at least one battalion out of the 17 that exist out there. Over.

Q Thank you.

Q Jack, do we have time for another?

MR. HOLT: Yes, go ahead.

Q Great. Colonel, Andrew Lubin again. Yesterday for you or this morning for us, Prime Minister Maliki and Vice President Talabani announced a new affiliation between the Shi'as and the Kurds that specifically excludes the Sunnis. How do you envision this affecting the relations in the army between the Sunnis and the Shi'as?

COL. DOCHNAL: Again, I'll -- I heard that. I saw it on the news. I just -- you know, down there where the rubber meets the road, I just don't see it making the impact that many might draw from a conclusion from that. I'd like to hold off, though, on telling you whether it's going to be good, bad or ugly. I really need to see it. And I'll be moving up to one of our bases tomorrow to kind of get a sensing of that. But from what I see right now -- and I'm talking to the -- all our different -- 11 different training centers out there -- I just don't see anyone taking it the wrong way.

I think everybody understands it's part of the political process, and again, this is just one step in many in the way ahead to building a stable and unified Iraq.

Q Because I mean that's what -- the Times -- The New York Times report this morning that quoted some of the Sunni leaders, and they're of course less than a threat -- you know, they're afraid they're going to be frozen out again, which I would think would make them want to start pulling their kids out of the IA or keeping them in Anbar, neither of which --

COL. DOCHNAL: Sir, I --

Q -- neither of which was --

COL. DOCHNAL: Again, I heard all that. I can only tell you what I see down there, you know, with the young Iraqi soldiers when I go around out there. I just -- I understand their concern politically, and again, that's at a level way above me. And I -- you know, I can't comment on their motivation, why they said what they said, and why they would feel that way. But I can tell you down there where the rubber meets the road, you just don't see the soldier -- the Iraqi soldier, whether it be Sunni, Shi'a or other ethnic background, curb whatever it might be in affecting his performance within the Iraqi army or his allegiance.

Over.

Q Great. Thank you.

Q Sir, one point. Obviously, the progress report September 15th is going to be pretty critical seeking out the way ahead. Is a lot of the information which you've been disseminating to us, is that going to be included in the report so that we can then broadcast that out as well?

COL. DOCHNAL: Was that a question or a statement?

Q Is the information that's being broadcast now to us as far as the training going to be in the final surge report?

COL. DOCHNAL: I believe so. I think you'll see quite a bit of that, and again, it's -- as I gave you some numbers and just kind of a flavor for the support to the Ministry of Defense and the joint headquarters is man, train and equip base to sustain the army. Again, it's an indicator of progress, but I think that's just one aspect of the whole report. I think some of it you'll hear, and again, it'll be all with in regard to progress that's being made.

So again, I hope that you're all taking that away from my conversations with you here today. Progress is being made in some pretty substantial numbers.

Over.

MR. HOLT: All right. Anyone else?

Q Just one more. Back at the beginning of the year, General Caldwell said something about motorizing about a third of the IA on MRAPs and APCs by the end of the year. Is that still on-line?

COL. DOCHNAL: I don't -- I'm not sure of that -- comments that General Caldwell made, but I do -- I can tell you this, is that there is ongoing efforts to continue to motorize or mechanize the army. And you know, in some of those areas you've seen those vehicles like the Badger in which we've been able to field a number of those per division, and again, that -- those are ongoing efforts. And I think they'll -- we'll see more of that here in the future.

And a force modernization piece, you know, probably for some of the equipment, the older, you know, models of BMPs and T-55s that are out there -- you'll probably see something in the future. But I believe that's all working through FMS. I'm not sure of the status of that but I do know there's ongoing efforts to modernize portions of the Iraqi army and to give them the technology and the mobility that they're going to need to achieve overmatch with the enemy, over.

MR. HOLT: All right.

COL. DOCHNAL: Hope everybody got that. On FMS, that's Foreign Military Sales, over.

MR. HOLT: Okay, all right, sir, very good, thank you. Anything else? We're -- got just a few more minutes left. And all right, sir, Colonel Dochnal, do you have any closing thoughts for us, closing comments?

COL. DOCHNAL: Well, again, you've got a lot of great Americans over here working alongside their Iraqi counterparts here to do the right thing -- and with regard to manning, training, equipping and basing the Iraqi army. Their efforts and the progress to date is probably unmatched in history when you start looking at the numbers. And just look at recently some of the numbers: how long it took us to produce brigades, battalions, divisions within the stryker formations within the American Army, and what we've done with the Iraqi army here.

So progress is being made. We'll continue to get better with each day, each event and each iteration out here. And although fighting continues, so does training.

And that's all I've got. Thank you very much. It's been an honor, a privilege here, to speak with you all today, and hope to talk to you again in the future.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir. Colonel Al Dochnal with us with the Bloggers Roundtable this morning. Hopefully sir, we can speak to you in the future, kind of get an update and see how things are going here a few weeks on. So we look forward to that.

COL. DOCHNAL: Okay, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir. COL. DOCHNAL: Tell everybody I said hi.

MR. HOLT: Will do.

END.